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# Deglobalising Design

Based on the presentation made at “Educating Designers for Global Citizenship”, UWC Cardiff in November 2005

FOCUSING ON A SPECIFIC CASE, THE POSTGRADUATE COURSE PRODUCT SERVICE SYSTEM DESIGN TAUGHT IN ENGLISH TO ITALIAN AND INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS OF THE DESIGN FACULTY AT MILAN POLYTECHNIC, THE AUTHOR REFLECTS ON THE PRESENT AND FUTURE OF DESIGNERS AS ‘REFLEXIVE PROFESSIONALS’ (TO QUOTE DONALD A. SCHÖN ‘) CALLED UPON TO ACT IN UNCERTAIN AND VAGUELY DEFINED CONTEXTS, TACKLE PROBLEMS IN HIGHLY ORIGINAL WAYS AND COME UP WITH WIDE-RANGING, EXPERIMENTAL AND INNOVATIVE SOLUTIONS RESORTING TO COMPLEX AND HYBRID TECHNIQUES AND TOOLS EITHER PURPOSELY DESIGNED OR TAKEN FROM OTHER FIELDS.

## The First Salvo

As long as [industrial design] concerns itself with confecting trivial toys, killing machines, and sexed-up shrouds, it has lost all reason to exist...

Papanek

When I first read Papanek around 1985, it came as a shock. Here I was, studying to be an industrial designer, in a world-class design school, a replica of the best in the West. And design was all about ushering in modernity and the good life to India. But we had already sensed something was deeply

wrong, and Papanek made us realise it first: we were not in the West, we were in India. Design was not the same here as it was in the countries and cultures that we were trying to emulate. His critique applied to us doubly: not only from the sustainability and ethics point of view as he wrote, but also from the cultural and aesthetic point of view that we intuited.

Indians became globalised circa 1700s, as part of the British Empire. Of course, our status was not of equals. Mahatma Gandhi led our fight for independence in the early twentieth century, but he kept unforgivingly pointing out the unequals

in our midst – the underprivileged, untouched and untouchable. In 1907, he critiqued ‘civilisation’ and technology as being highly problematic and inimical to real *swaraj* (self-rule) particularly for India. It was he who argued passionately for empowering communities to become self-sufficient and sustainable till his last breath. Today, India is again a hub of globalisation, one of the catalysts for which is a colonial relic – the English language. Our unequals remain as they were, gaining little out of India’s global achievements, of course, this view will not be universally accepted. I firmly believe, however, that it is time to rethink our models of growth, progress and development, and reorient design. And here, by ‘we’ I don’t only mean India but the whole planet. Globalisation is not helping build a planetary consciousness and collective responsibility.

### And Yet...

What inspires consumers to spend money in a slow economy? Frequently, it’s a hot, new, attention-grabbing design that creates an emotional ‘Gotta Have It!’ response. Design has always been one of the most compelling reasons why consumers buy a product, but never more so than today.

#### IDSa 2003 Design Trends Report

This is how the Industrial Designers Society of America positions ‘design’, but it could well be the Indian design establishment or industry lobbies such as the Confederation of Indian Industry. What is particularly embarrassing is that while this text is applicable [problematic as it is] to the present reality of Western economies, it remains at the aspirational level for us. Our developmental ideal is to match Western standards of living for our entire population, even though in private we know this is impossible. We aren’t content with aspiring towards the qualitative aspects but seek to emulate it in manifest form as well, the implications of which we know on our planet’s health. And the world’s industry is only too happy perpetuating this. Indian industry, in the most part, finds it easier to import or copy than to

commission original innovation, notwithstanding the odd Tata Nano even if we were to discount its own problematic. In our economy, innovation occurs invisibly—at the bottom of the so-called pyramid or even outside of the pyramid—where the innovator, producer and user are often from the same locality and subculture, and sometimes even one and the same person.

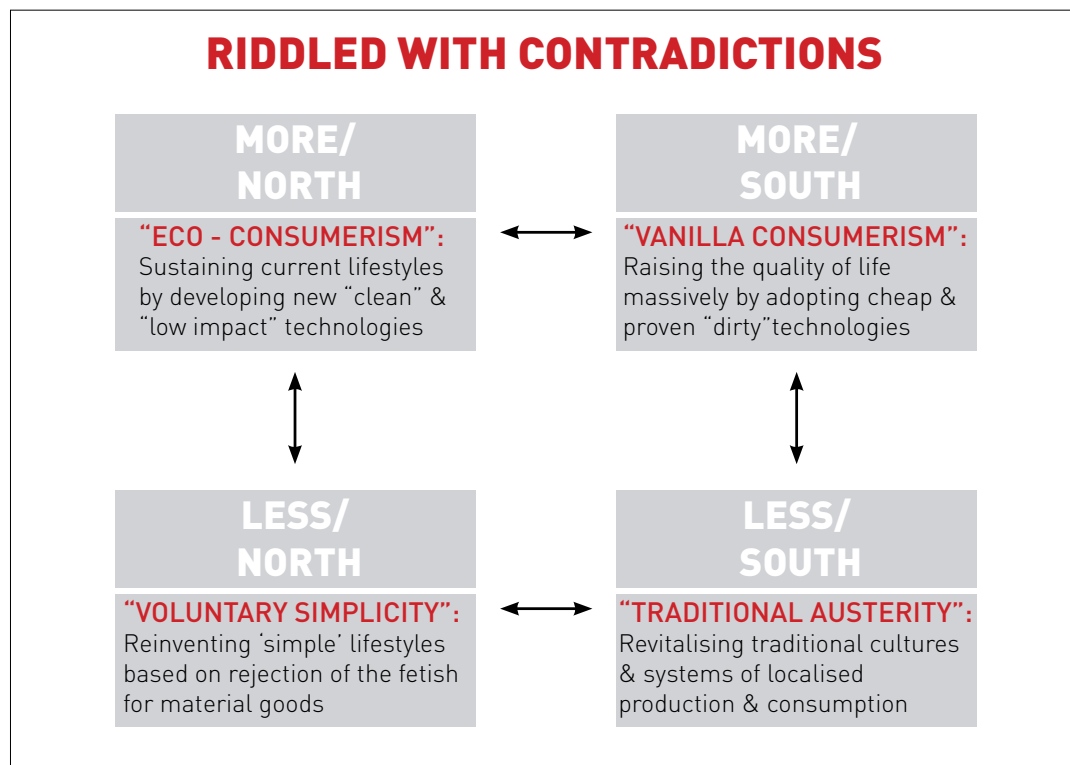
### A Reluctant Majority; A Fragmented Minority

The ‘First Things First 2000’ manifesto was in fact an updated version of a similar document published in 1964; this shows that the issues addressed in it were long-standing and were unresolved. The tumult instigated by this text highlighted the ambivalence of many designers towards the profession’s perceived role[s].

Meyer

Issues of social responsibility do find greater currency in India than the apparently low levels in the West, although this proportion seems to be changing of late. Any sensitive person cannot help noticing the stark contrast between the slick designs being created in the studios and the ever-increasing squalor and poverty around us, the increasing failure of the infrastructure, and the very different aesthetic and culture of our streets as compared with what we learn and later, practice and preach. However, the majority of Indian designers would be as ambivalent about their profession’s ultimate role and positioning as their Western counterparts, remaining mutely sympathetic to alternative causes. My own informal study suggests that those designers who have pursued alternative careers do find their education relevant, but are dissatisfied with the lack of exposure to alternative career options and the absence of critical perspectives in college.

This leaves only a small minority of us who are committed to re-orienting design towards addressing wider and more meaningful purposes. Yet, it seems to me that even this small minority is fragmented into different, almost



competitive positions titled variously as social design, service design, design for sustainability, eco-design, and so on.

What is the reason behind this?

Possibly this has to do with where each of us comes from, the particular context, brand of politics, book or theory that has inspired us whether it's guilt or biomimicry, dematerialisation or natural capitalism. But I suspect there's also this competitive streak, the desire to be 'the next big thing'. Some of our differences are superficial, but some run very deep...

This is a very crude attempt at mapping the contradictions on one plane: On the North-South axis, I map the contrary positions of 'more' versus 'less' [in terms of consumption or GDP]. On the West-East axis, I map [the] 'north' versus [the] 'south'. In each quadrant, I have listed an approach towards improving quality of life. This is very cursory, we need to articulate and map out all our positions and contradictions in relation to each other, and obtain a strategic perspective of our cumulative efforts. Understanding differences even within

this minority rather than glossing over them can only help us. Is there anything at all, then, that we do agree upon? Assuming what motivates all of us is a concern for a sustainable future for our entire planet [and all its inhabitants], we obviously cannot condone the dominant historical approach to 'growth' and 'development'. Can we first agree to reject the all-pervasive 'eternal abundance' growth and development model –that the affluent countries have grown wealthy but precariously unsustainable with, and that the poorer countries are clamouring to embrace as their magic wand for growth?

### Delinking Design from Economics

From the very beginning, design has been firmly fixed in the mechanisms of consumer culture [The] 'design for the market' approach is in large measure a contributing element in the difficulties designers face today as they try to [develop] a much-needed 'social model' of design practice.

Meyer and Margolin

Clearly, the market model has run its course. It is becoming more and more obvious now that our very measures of progress, growth and development are inadequate and misleading. Yet, our governments and global institutions refuse to unqualifiedly acknowledge this folly, nor is business able to embrace changing our systems of measure. All contemporary design education has emerged from the Bauhaus model, which was defined in the [European] context of rebuilding a war-torn economy by raising levels of industrial production and consumption. This 'economic growth' model continues to define [and constrain] us. It is time to reconceptualise design in tune with contemporary knowledge [about the past, present and future] and re-prioritise our current and future constituencies.

It was Einstein who said that you can't hope to solve a problem if you're steeped in the same consciousness that created it in the first place. Today, we have the opportunity to step outside the mindset that created the problem of non-sustainable and inequitable economic growth, thanks to the tremendous advances in knowledge and understanding we've gained from the ecological sciences. To this, I submit another field that can contribute to our knowledge and understanding—spirituality. That is why my position on sustainability is that it won't be achieved without two kinds of transformation: external and internal. I submit that design has to engage with both, not merely the external. Therefore, I would like to extend the notion of the 'social model' to a 'spiritual model'. I get my inspiration from Mahatma Gandhi, who insisted on individual action prior to or simultaneously with collective action to achieve self-reliance and win political independence.

### What's Wrong with Design for Business?

Here is how business may well argue for design for sustainability:

*We should develop products which [people] love and cherish... [with] which [they may get] so attached to that they revolt against the prospect of losing it.*

Otto

This was a totally earnest but hopelessly naïve suggestion made at a UK Design Council seminar on sustainable design: as long as sustainability can be somehow co-opted into the endless growth and profits paradigm, it is fine. To me, it captures the typically myopic and blinkered response of business to the challenge of sustainability.

In my experience at least to be perfectly honest, the vast majority of business, in its pursuit of delivering shareholder value, is about avoiding risk unless absolutely unavoidable and attaining endless growth—including those with heavy research and innovation budgets. "If it ain't broke, don't fix it" is their favourite mantra. 'Innovation' reads well in brochures and advertisements, but it raises the chances of failure. On the other hand, design is all about disruptive change. When we claim that design is the art/science of risk-proof industrial innovation, we actually 'dumb it down' – we diminish its potency. When we deploy it for short-term, tactical purposes, we again diminish its potency. In its thirteen years of existence, the school where I teach has only been approached by industry for tactical assignments, often seeking to exploit the classroom as a cheap source of unchallenging ideas.

On the other hand, I see that NGOs are more open to longer-term, strategic projects, and often provide the really exciting design challenges, but they don't have the luxury of lavish funds, nor do they supply the opportunity for glamour or ego boosting.

Let us agree once and for all that business values and disposition are intrinsically antithetical to a social/ecological agenda and even to an unconstrained ideation and innovation agenda, while design has enormous affinity with social, ecological and spiritual values and change is its vital nutrition—the more radical, the better. So, why not leave the management of business and risk in secure and predictable ways to the CAs and MBAs? Let them approach design only when and if they are truly open to radical ideas that aim at social transformation. Can we rescue design to its unconstrained potential of being 'the' discipline of ideas, of

creative social or systemic transformation, liberated from any narrow context?

### Isn't Design – Business = Art?

If we 'de-frame' design from business, what we obtain is not 'art', but ideas and methods [many do overlap with art]: what some call 'design thinking'. A core element of 'design thinking' is systems thinking –an ecological concept– just as another is out-of-the-box thinking.

For many of us, design without a business 'frame' is tantamount to art. I remember my own indoctrination at d-school: anything that didn't make money got trashed as 'art'. Artists were self-indulgent and unaccountable losers; designers, on the other hand, were the people with a mission: with problems to solve and industries to save. This comparison was as artificial as it was counter-productive: we denied ourselves the incredible wealth of ideas that originate from art. I'm glad to note that design is now being abstracted of its application context [in the Ph.D. discussion groups, at least], and its real value as a combination of ideas and methods is being realised. My thesis is that design comprises two core elements: systems or holistic thinking and creative or out-of-the-box thinking. I see art and design on the same continuum – design merely [and unfortunately!] tends to be more methodical, conservative and pragmatic.

### We Need New Exemplars

- Enrique Peñalosa: Bogotá
- Margrit Kennedy: No-Interest Money
- Laurie Baker: Local Building
- Michelangelo Pistoletto: Love Difference network
- Lyonpo Jigme Thinley: Gross National Happiness
- Masanobu Fukuoka: Do-Nothing Farming
- Carlo Petrini: Slow Food movement
- Sudhir Sahi/UNDP/Government of India: Endogenous Tourism

Here is the irony: some of the most breakthrough design ideas of late have come from non-designers. Each of these embody a systems perspective with some audacious out-of-the-box thinking, that should put us to shame. Mind you, it's not important whether they are succeeding or not [let us de-link design from the tyranny of success once and for all], but the sheer intelligence of their idea and its ability to trigger better ideas [let us firmly focus design on achieving quality ideas]. I would like to compile all these and more such case studies, to show students that a career in design can actually be creatively exciting, challenging and fulfilling. Can we steer them towards great [not necessarily 'big'] ideas as their legitimate role and purpose?

Why can't we enable and empower our students to produce hundreds of such breakthrough ideas? I believe this is simply because we do not set up such challenges for them. Instead, we 'dumb-down' their minds by setting inane [business-defined] challenges in the belief that it will train them better for an industry job. How do we liberate design to becoming the discipline of quality ideas and societal innovation? I will share with you a list of inspiring and intriguing ideas picked out from the scrapbook in my mind. I have chosen those that can be applied at an institutional as well as at a personal level, and I truly hope they will spark or catalyse our individual as well as collective thought process here. Here then are a dozen assorted suggestions, some drawn from Srishti's experience.

### 1. Understand the Political Economy of Design

To comprehend how design evolves from an individual activity of proximate designers into an 'object' of politics, we should understand the political economy of design. This begins from the notion of design as a process of creating artifacts that have economic value.

Sulfikar Amir

An extremely important step is to learn from our past: understand our own cumulative impact on our society and

environment. A study on the political economy of design, in terms of who really gains and at whose expense through our interventions, is imperative. This is the one book I would love to write, and I'd be happy if someone got there before I do.

## 2. Interrogate 'Growth' and 'Development'

Liberalisation helps the rich access design more easily, widening the gap. Importing products crushes local talent. Uncritically adopting alien cultural norms for design triggers flight of talent. Flight of value leaves no option but to export labour and raw materials. Design for the 'public good' rendered unviable, disappears. Real 'problems' and 'quality of life' issues ignored in favour of more trivial ones. Creates want, not choice [and 'freedom' implicit] 'Globalisation' should not mean following the Western example"

**Balaram**

We need to problematise notions of growth and development – for our students, as well as for ourselves – and draw inferences and implications for design. For instance [above] is Balaram's critique of liberalisation and globalisation. While he does not spell out an agenda for design, we can pretty much infer it by reading between the lines. The cry for social accountability from design is arising around the world. Here are three faculty members of the University of Botswana's engineering department.

Most products that are used in Botswana are not compatible with the country's conditions. Botswana is in a situation where, 'the manifested needs of humankind [must] become the engines to drive design solutions.' Despite this fact, designers still ignore the above needs and concentrate on the market demands which most of the time are not 'needs' but 'wants'.

**Khumomotse, M'Rithaa and Moalosi**

And here is Ezio Manzini. What he says here has grave consequences for developing countries like India, where

the informal economy remains the country's biggest social enterprise, and yet enjoys no legitimacy or political representation.

In the last century the idea [of 'comfort' and 'growth'] generated and propagated throughout the world by the west, was [to grow in ways] that lead to a reduction in the informal economies and an increase in the formal economy entities that produce and deliver the services and products necessary.

**Manzini**

## 3. Find Alternative Values, Clients and Roles

The basic human needs for material security and comfort are real and can be purchased, but beyond a certain point, [we confuse] consumption for the harder-won yet more-enduring values of love, peace of mind and contribution to others.

**Robin**

Critiquing is easy, but coming up with alternatives is tough, especially in a unipolar world – not just in terms of super-powers, but also in terms of ideas and ideologies. While all our governments seem to agree on a single idea, it is amazing how diametrically opposite their citizens feel. It appears that along with the commons, common sense and sensibility are also becoming disempowered. Let us not yield to the imaginary security of cynical pragmatism. Of course, this immediately raises the question of who is it that design works for? Who'll pay our fees?

From my experience and observations, there are a number of alternate clients for us: government, NGOs, no profits and community/social organisations, academic and cultural institutions, and the very substantial option of becoming idea-driven social entrepreneurs ourselves. There is also a huge 'sunshine' economy that's emerged around fixing the unpleasant consequences of non-sustainability, like waste management, that has eluded our radar screens. I

present business as just one of the many opportunity spaces for design and designers when I teach. The NextDesign Leadership Institute is already talking about shifting the focus of design from being a cog in the wheel to being the leader, and going beyond discipline-specific simple problems to non-discipline-specific complex problems. In brief, we have nothing to lose but our blinkers.

#### 4. Audit and Reorient Pedagogy

- Stop teaching counterproductive beliefs and values
- Teach appropriate beliefs and values in more effective ways
- Implement a pedagogy of liberation
- Redefine progress as achieving sustainability
- Replace anthropocentric values with eco-centric values
- Remedy skill gaps
- Reorient education towards the future
- Eliminate parochialism

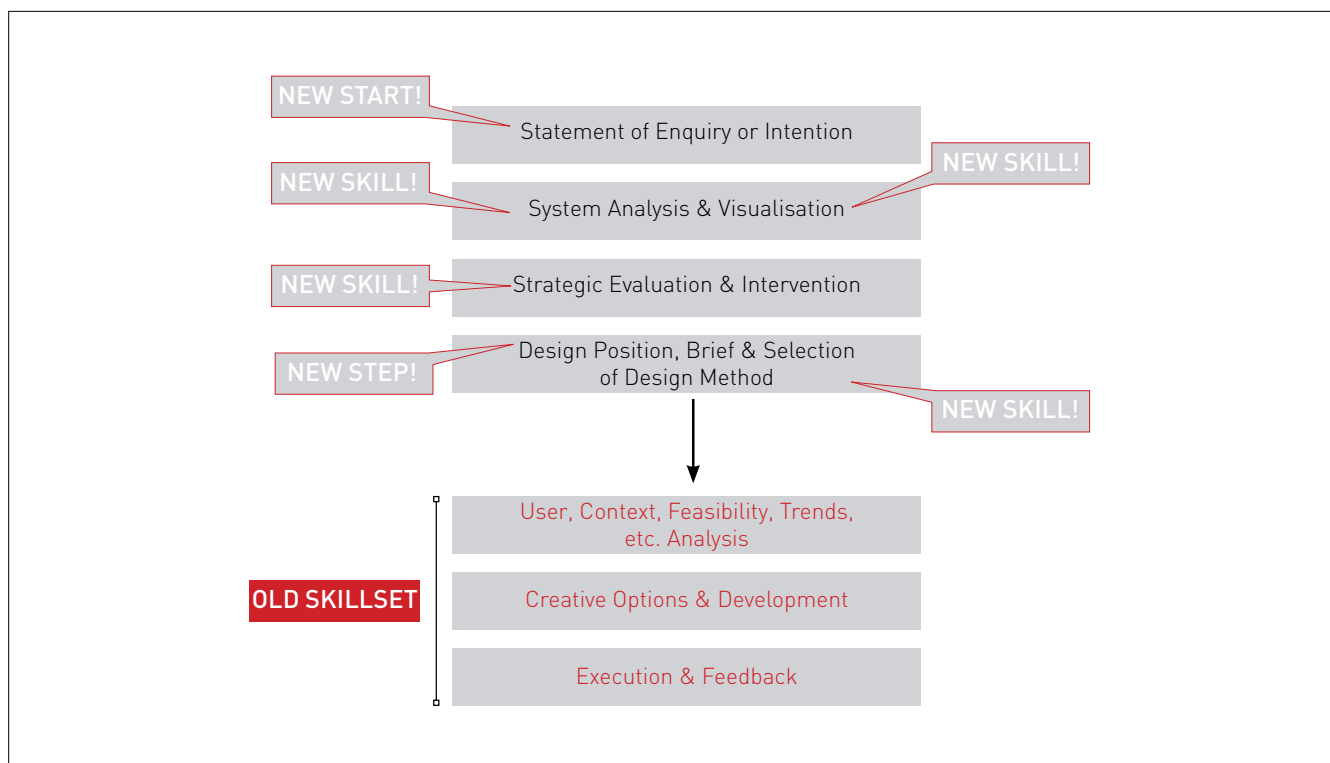
Empower the learner to take action. Lautensach

A cliché but built around a kernel of truth, like most: education is the most obvious place to start making a difference. Alexander Lautensach identifies tertiary education as the key culprit propagating unsustainable ideas and practices, saying most decision-makers and proponents of such practices hold tertiary degrees. His point is that bringing about fundamental changes in educational values can promote sustainable behaviour and decision-making. I believe that his suggestions apply even more to design education, perhaps posing a bigger challenge for us than for general education.

#### 5. Redefine the Method

When designers approach design 'problems' in this holistic, relational way; when they develop this systemic approach into a methodology, the design profession will finally be able to expand its horizons and become a truly social practice that addresses our real and almost overwhelming needs and concerns.

Meyer





Most design programs today have a course on systems thinking and design or strategic design [or their equivalent] at the advanced levels. It seems obvious that this should inform our approach to designing in every project we undertake subsequently. But does it, actually? Do we really apply systemic and strategic thinking to our innovation? If we do, what's the reason for it usually failing to produce a genuine breakthrough? I wager it is the constraining frame of 'business' once again. And yet, when I do apply systemic and strategic thinking to an assignment, I know it produces amazing results every time.

I believe systems thinking and strategic thinking are too important to be taught only at the graduate level, and not so difficult that they cannot be introduced at the foundational level. I propose we insert these modules as a precursor to beginning design activity, so they inform and contextualise the act of designing throughout its tenure. In this proposed model, I envisage widening the scope at the starting point, then introducing systems or ecological analysis and visualisation – both important new skills, followed by a strategic assessment of the various possible design interventions. The strategic dimension would introduce concepts of short-term versus long-term and optimal versus wasteful or limited. The idea is for the student designer to realise that she has to generate and choose from several strategic/systemic options prior to commencing actual design work. In fact, note that the actual designing part has been rather diminished in terms of proportion, in comparison with the pre-design analytical and strategic work.

## 6. Consolidate Old Skills

Social system problems which are ill-formulated, where the information is confusing, where there are many clients and decision-makers with conflicting values, and where the ramifications in the whole system are thoroughly confusing.

**Buchanan and Rittel**

I'm sure you are all familiar with the concept of 'wicked problems', as defined originally by Rittel, and later quoted by Buchanan. I'm not sure I agree with Buchanan's premise that designers are constantly dealing with 'wicked problems' [I actually wish they did] based on my experience of working on countless 'no-brainer' assignments, which is why I'm not sure if these are old skills that we merely need to consolidate or new skills that we need to equip ourselves for. Whichever be the case, there's no denying these are exactly the kind of problems that design for sustainability poses, and that we have to learn how to deal with them – possibly based on how societies have historically dealt with them.

## 7. Develop the Individual

Poonam Bir Kasturi co-founded Srishti [since 2007, she is on her own], and strived to bridge traditional craft with contemporary markets and the design school. She launched a unique 'specialisation' in 2002, called 'Design for Community and Self' [DCS]. Its premise was to nurture the student's personal ideas and values to help her define a meaningful work-life mix, and then enable her acquisition of the necessary skills and understanding to achieve it. This has now evolved into a project-based interdisciplinary design course called 'Sangama', or confluence of streams. The students who opted for it are versatile learners, adapters and improvisers, with only foundational technical skills, but with powerful contextual, social and process capabilities. Most importantly, they seem to be having fun and carving out interesting and unusual future careers for themselves.

## 8. Don't Exclude the Spiritual

I coordinated an interdisciplinary studio based on the living [folk-oral-musical] legacy of the fifteenth century mystic saint-poet, Kabir. Students were immersed in the research [done by our artist-in-residence] and were invited to interpret and express Kabir's ideas using their own modern

media skills and sensibilities. This resulted in a range of projects that were 'reflective/spiritual interventions' in effect. The forms evolved were 'art' but the methods used were 'design'. It is worth commenting that humour was a consistent thread through many of the works that came up, indicating that spirituality need not be terribly severe or serene either.

A colleague suggested that I should begin my presentation with this section. I wavered, because this is indeed my personal position [and passion]: that any profound social transformation requires far more internal effort than in the external, and the only way to achieve that is to design for and with the spirit. India has had a legacy of shortages, and what has kept her resilient and cheerful through these is her powerful spiritual traditions. While some accuse these of glorifying poverty, I think they make perfect ecological sense as they scorn material wealth and selfish greed for spiritual wealth and selfless sacrifice. This is what Mahatma Gandhi paraphrased so evocatively, "The earth has enough for everyone's need, but not for everyone's greed." This is the kind of abstinence that I wish people like Mr George W. Bush would preach to their audiences!

## 9. Disrupt the Conventional

At Srishti, we have driven a 3-week wedge into the 33-week annual quota, that we call the Interim Semester. It requires every student to sign up for one of the various elective programs for its entire duration. The electives are an eclectic mix of critical and speculative, earthy and sublime, always new and topical. They defy conventional 'design specialisations' and are offered by non-mainstream practitioners. They have become the major source for new thinking and creative initiatives amongst students.

Can you take a minority idea subvert and infect the entire institution? Yes, you can, if you have the director on your side! In Srishti's case, though, Geetha Narayanan has often been the principal instigator of alternative, subversive

and speculative ideas. In spite of this, it remains a real struggle to get a broad buy-in, be it at the student level or the faculty level. However, we've been fortunate to get a formidable array of extremely talented and unconventional artists, designers and technologists visiting us. They enable us to place on offer for three weeks every year, a range of fascinating hands-on workshops. Over six years, we've seen how the seeds planted here bear fruit in terms of student interests, passions and sometimes even careers.

## 10. Join Forces with Visionaries

Early on, I realised I had no 'big ideas' for social change [through design]; hence I decided to offer my services to those who did. All my career, I've worked with visionary NGOs who work in sustainability, gender, craft and livelihood areas. My inputs have played a modest role in actualising their vision, and have positively impacted the communities they work with.

I could blame it on the constraining frame of business, but I think it was my personal inability to think beyond it when I graduated as a designer that I was absolutely convinced that something was terribly wrong with the world, although I had no idea what needed to be done. I was fortunate in finding a number of friends who were working with the ideas of Mahatma Gandhi, Richard Chambers, Paulo Freire, Laurie Baker, Vandana Shiva and Ela Bhatt. Since I just could not derive a career out of Papanek's ideas, I did the next best thing: offer my capabilities to visionaries who had. I think institutions can also follow suit; it is no shame to join up with visionaries.

## 11. Failing is Good, Fearful is Bad

If my previous point highlighted the need to constantly keep looking for and adopting alternative values for ourselves, in this one I want us to liberate our ambition. I applaud Bruce Mau's courage and commitment. Let us also let the idealism

and ambition out of our closets. Let us bring back risk-taking and fearlessness in design—which means accepting and even celebrating failures. My design portfolio comprises a number of failed projects that I am very proud of. At a conference on 'Development by Design' in 2002 that we organised, I proposed a seminar where we could share and learn from all our failures, instead of the endless gatherings where we dress up and parade our mostly limited successes to appear much larger than they actually are.

## 12. Don't Work in Isolation

The partnership [model] stresses the constant intention and effort to understand other realities and creatively address problems in an effort to develop mutually beneficial solutions. Whereas the dominator system is based on the assumption of a zero-sum game [I win/you lose, or vice versa], in a partnership approach human creativity is used in an effort to develop win/win situations.

Montuori

People like us everywhere have experimented with 'alternative' directions for design, with some promising results. So far, no one can claim to have hit upon the definitive and exemplary model, though we're arguably getting closer and closer. It is obvious that we would achieve a lot more if we did not work in isolation. If we form a collaborative and interdependent network of experimenting institutions, we can pool our knowledge and resources, and extend the scope of our experiments.

One of the things that make Bruce Mau seem heroic is the image of him waging a lonely battle, against all odds. True, it is a lonely battle and the odds are huge, but we can ameliorate this by shedding our isolation and joining forces. In order to leverage such a network, we must make it collaborative and interdependent. As Negroponte says, there are three ingredients to stimulating a creative culture and big ideas: diversity and interdisciplinarity, fearless risk-taking, and openness and idea-sharing.

Alfonso Montuori has made a very convincing case for developing new models that are predicated on pluralism, complexity and a 'planetary consciousness'. This resounds very well with my belief that multicultural teams are a highly powerful creative resource to address not only global but local issues as well, and the faster we evolve ways of formulating and activating these, the sooner we'll begin to see their results. The greatest hurdles in achieving these are the prevailing norms of migration and work permits, but I know that the scientist community has achieved an impressively high degree of mobility and collaboration for itself. We should follow suit.

## 13. Recognise Differences

Sustainability emphasizes the diversity of societal paths of development not only the 'Third World' countries but also – and even more so the highly industrialized countries of the North should be regarded as 'developing' countries.

Becker et al

We do need to agree on our vision on sustainability, equity and spirituality – in brief, our future [global] society. We do need to address potentially serious differences that probably exist, before they get entrenched. We can then debate and devise various approaches to achieving the vision, co-operatively yet mindful of differences.

The first task to forming this network would be to map our agreements and disagreements, and resolve the disagreements to the extent that they do not become counter-productive. I hope we can use this seminar series to achieve this, face-to-face and online. One of the learnings from India is that apparent contradictions can coexist harmoniously and synergistically within the same system.

For me personally, the exciting thing about sustainability is that there's no unique route to achieving it, it's so completely contextual. In fact, the substantial pervasiveness of traditional knowledge and its counterpart, spiritual values,

in our midst even today offer a rich resource for us to jointly explore and experiment with our future lifestyles.

#### 14. Ground the Network

It is my submission that any initiative focussing on sustainability and social transformation [in a global context] must be simultaneously located in multiple sites: at least one on every continent [except Antarctica!] It is also my submission that any such programme would benefit immeasurably from having a solid community component. Given our academic focus, this probably means we need quality NGO partners.

I hope you agree with my conviction that the network must be representative, and that it must be rooted in community. I realise finding the right NGO partners may not be easy, but given our specific focus, I think we'd greatly benefited from having them, and that it is possible to find some really inspiring partners.

Today, there is no place where truly multi-disciplinary approaches to solve development concerns [are] found if there is one group working successfully in water management, they don't often collaborate with other groups working in rural health or aids for disabled people [which is why] an educational institution would be the ideal instrument that can act as the net-worker.

Kasturi

The factions and politics of the NGO world are no secret. However, that does not take away from the great work many NGOs are doing – in their chosen areas. It is remarkable, as Poonam observed, that NGOs have not come together to articulate their vision of integrated development.

#### An Invitation

I would be happy to offer Srishti as the hub for such a network. We have an excellent critical, creative and logistical

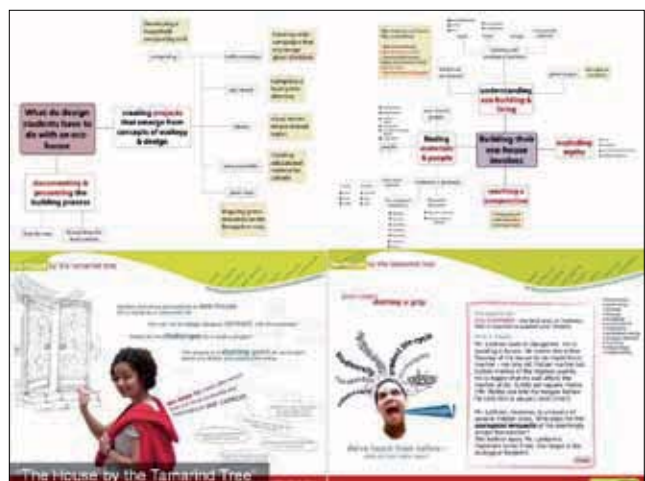
infrastructure to host joint experiments and development. We also enjoy close relationships with a group of field-based NGOs who are excited about being part of such a network.

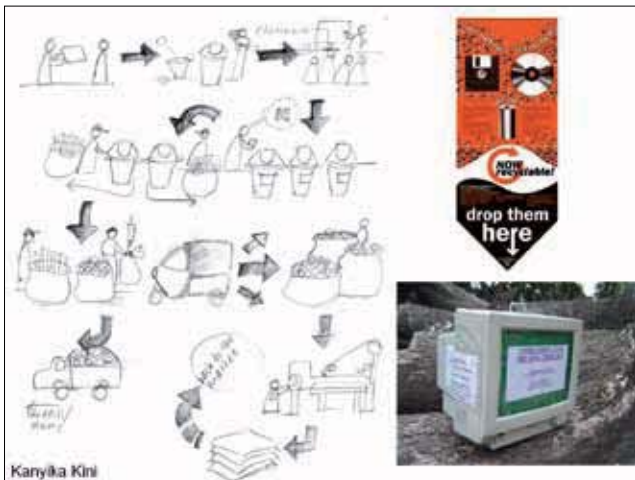
Srishti has hosted researchers, conferences and workshops on the issues of technology, design and development. Our faculty has immense experience in devising and running courses that explore issues of sustainability and development from the ground up. We have close ties with a group of NGOs who are extremely keen to factor in design as one of their critical strategies and methodologies for development; one of their initiatives is to initiate a post-graduate course in sustainable architecture and construction that pairs a graduate architect with an expert mason. In all, we have all the key ingredients for a fruitful research programme, all it awaits is the momentum to set it rolling.

#### Case Studies

##### Develop the Individual

1. The DCS course looked for real-life projects where students could learn about sustainability and also add value through their design skills. This was a house being built by an eco-sensitive couple. The students learnt web design and developed an educational website around the story of the house as it got designed and built.

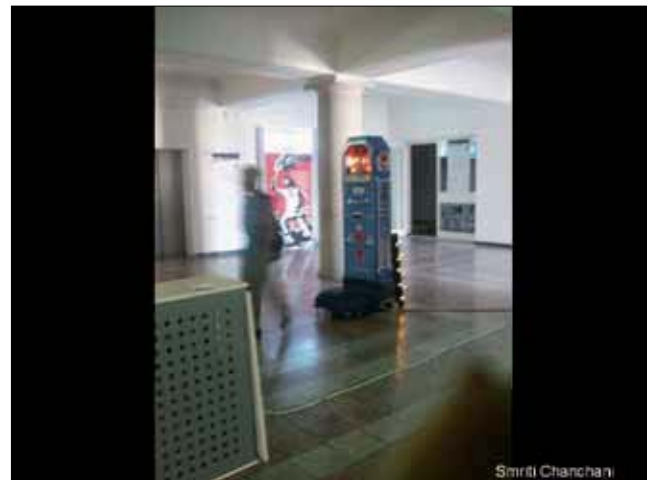




2. "Can design apply outside traditional industry-oriented contexts?" asked this student in her thesis project. She then chose to find an answer in the area of waste management, where she intuitively felt that "communication within a system can enhance its efficiency".

#### Including the Spiritual

3. This is an *ulat-bansi* or 'absurd' object that seems complicated and tricky to unlock, but is actually really very simple. This is inspired by Kabir's frequent lament in his poetry: "Why don't they understand that it's so simple?"



4. This was a 'spiritometer' based on a weighing machine, rendered in typical Indian street style, combining the exotic and the everyday unselfconsciously. It asks you to 'eliminate all thought' before inserting a coin to obtain your 'spiritual quotient', calculated by an elaborate formula. The ticket that emerges has this comment printed alongside your quotient: 'You missed the point, numbskull!' Rudely put, that is the essence of much of Kabir's incisive poetry.
5. An interactive animation where the viewer became part of the film, as co-travellers on the circular journey of life and death.







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6. Another *ulat-bansi* or 'upside-down' fable that the viewer could actually 'navigate' through and interact with. Of course, you ended up with more questions than answers.
7. This is part of a 'viral marketing' project to provoke people to pause and reflect, and hopefully pass these on. In some ways, this seems to echo Stuart Walker's exploration of product design, sustainability and spirituality through material values of 'roughness,' 'localness' and 'humanness'.
8. A web-based exposition of Kabir's evocative couplets, where visitors can browse, share their own interpretations, and initiate and participate in discussions.

#### The Interim Semester at Srishti

9. Looking at the shopping center phenomenon sweeping urban India, we asked students to investigate this phenomenon and capture its essence in a series of interactive installations. Here you can see 'the irresistible freebie', 'the shopping-bag totem' and 'the new tactility'.
10. A workshop that introduced GIS techniques was located in Devanahalli, a nondescript village to the north of Bangalore that also happens to be the site of the new international airport for the city. Students were challenged to creatively use GIS in ways that investigate, inform and empower the local community.



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### Joining Forces with Visionaries

11. Kutch is one of the most backward regions of India, mainly due to its inhospitable terrain, desert ecology, and acute scarcity. However, the traditional nomadic culture has evolved the most amazing craft forms as part of their culture. A few grassroots NGOs are working to protect the women workers' interests whilst developing and marketing this craft. I led the team that designed the branding and merchandising system for this initiative.
12. Kutch was devastated in a massive earthquake in 2001. One of the most important post-quake initiatives was a network of info-kiosks that were meant for the quake-affected citizens to access information on their rights and privileges, and also process and monitor their



entitlements for relief. I consulted with the initiative on developing a more effective user-interface as well as retail design for this network.

13. Much of the post-quake rebuilding effort was in the area of building innovation and technology. The confederation of NGOs soon instituted a dedicated unit to research, innovate and propagate appropriate building technologies, targeting the architect/engineer and mason equally.
14. The craft marketing effort was given a renewed thrust, and a dual initiative of sponsoring high-quality traditional pieces along with developing contemporary pieces with traditional elements was launched. Here is





an in-store promotion that I designed, that was shown across the country.

15. The Endogenous Tourism initiative is being piloted across 31 sites in India. Kutch is one of them, and the nodal NGO facilitating this project is the one I've been associated with. Shown here are elements of the marketing communication strategy as it unfolds. The concept of a "sub-regional destination brand" is being experimented with for the first time in India.



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